



Coat of Many Pockets

Another Minnesota deer season, I sat in my stand lost in my thoughts, watching the prettiest pink clouds run before a full moon. There was plenty of wind out there. A surprise to me, I had gotten swept away by that whole Tree to D.C. thing, and I just could not let it go. On-line I followed the tree's journey east towards our Nation's Capitol. Even now, in the dark waiting for morning's light to come, I kept thinking of the people I had met because of the tree. I thought of the high school student who told me about how his grandfather had been the Chairman of the Leech Lake Band in 1992, and the role he held for the last tree from the Chippewa National Forest and Leech Lake Reservation. For this young man, this is a tree of inspiration.

I think they brought every Bigfork elementary school kid down to the Marcell tree event. Kids are great! They love the tree. And given a choice between Smokey Bear and Santa Klaus, kids will choose Smokey. At the Grand Rapids tree event, they brought in a bus of nursing home residents, parking it beside the tree so the folks could see what they had made ornaments for. Perhaps for them, it is a tree of continuing engagement. Or maybe simply a tree of delight.

After I met their teacher at the tree cutting ceremony, I taught a segment on population biology to the environmental studies class at Bug school. I talked to the kids about gray wolves and bald eagles, their biology, and the ups and downs of their populations over the past couple hundred years. The kids from many schools are fund-raising so that they can go to Washington on a bus for the lighting ceremony. I met some young dancers who will perform at the lighting ceremony. For these kids, maybe this is a learning tree. Or a sharing tree.

Perhaps the one that sticks with me the most is the fellow that builds elevators for a living. He had worked on the elevators for the new Twin Towers in New York City, those which replace the ones in which so many lives were lost years ago on September 11. This man told me about how when he first started the job, he thought he was unaffected by where he was, until a day off came where he had a chance to consider that he was standing upon hallowed ground. That was when he broke down and cried. For some reason, he was drawn to the tree, and just had to come and see it. I hope for him, this was a healing tree, one of peace and good will.

It's hard to resist a tree with this kind of power. Even though we all know pain, we are meant to open our hearts to joy. It's funny how a tree can do that for you. And I kept thinking about how many more stories I might know, had I stuck with the tree on its 2,000 mile trip across our country, making its many stops. But deer season is important to me, so I passed on that opportunity. And now I was thinking that perhaps I was sorry about that choice. A season full of

surprises, at 7:15 that opening day a buck showed up out of the blue, stepping into an opening, and I took my first deer with copper. The moment I got my shot off, my first thought was “Now I can go to the tree!”

In something of a hurry, I started to rise to go find my deer when I heard a voice. It said, “Wait. Stay a while.” I felt a push back into my seat. It’s good for me to sit on my stand, and it was certainly early to leave. So I cracked open my thermos and poured a cup of coffee. It’s not good to rush copper, as the ballistics is not the same as lead ammunition. Besides, I had hardly had any deer season just yet. There are so many things I love about this time in the woods, so much of which has little to do with shooting an animal. I drank my coffee, thought about the red squirrels I had not yet heard as they come out of their cozy night nests and scoldingly remind their neighbors of their little territories, and poured another cup. I gazed at the red pine, watching for how the growing light plays color games on their trunks. My heart gladdened as two gray jays came sailing in from where the deer must lay, briefly perching on the stand as if to say, it’s time to open this animal up so that we can fill our larders from which we will feed our late winter babies. I broke apart the good-luck cookies my partner had given me for my hunting pack and set them around the stand, hoping this pair would come back. They did not. They wanted something better.

As I sat there, I devised a plan to prolong my season. It involved the use of a four-wheeler to drag this deer to where I could gut it and watch the birds come. Enjoy the season. Perhaps even waylay a skunk on its way to my barn. As the wind blew, I made a mental note about the need for a bigger thermos, and a warmer coat.

So that is how I came to sit out for the next few mornings and a couple of afternoons. The cookie pieces survived the first afternoon and next morning, but were gone after that. Squirrel tracks in the dusting of snow told the story there. The cold wind whipped up, and sitting in this weather was not for the faint of heart. But I have a nice layering of orange these days, courtesy of my better half. The heavy, inner jacket is made of the most beautiful, soft material that is just so warm and comfy. I learned the hard way that this material really soaks up liquids. It being too chilly to strip down, and the sleeve cuffs too tight to roll up, I left it on as I field dressed my animal. Later in the day with the deer hanging in my garage, I found that everywhere I had been had taken on the look of a crime scene. The car I had moved. The house I had entered. The chicken coop I had done chores in. Scrubbing was required.

As untimely as it was, I had to wash that jacket, which caused me to switch to the heavy, outer coat as I sat in the stand. Definitely underused in previous seasons, I discovered that this big coat is wonderful if for no other reason than it has the most amazing array of pockets. You can load up these pockets with so much stuff that you don’t even need a pack. Your sandwich, your camera, your bird-watching binoculars, the .22 ammo in case the skunks are out and about, hats and mitts. Heck, even your thermos will fit in a pocket of this coat. I just love this coat! Too bad orange is not fashionable year-round.

I had at least as much fun watching that gut pile and all the birds it drew in, as I did shooting the deer. Visiting the woods during the Minnesota deer season is one of my favorite things, and I quickly came to the conclusion that I was glad I had stayed. I was also glad to have used copper

ammunition, so that all that feeds upon the gut pile will not be exposed to lead. Snubbing the cookies, the gray jays started working that pile as soon as I opened the deer up. I was happy to see the magpies come, and learned these birds are actually flying in before daylight. Blue jays cart away this stuff just like they will the sunflower seeds at your feeder, caching food for the times to come. The red-breasted nuthatch is the little squeaky bird, almost like a wind-up toy with its jerky movements. As the raven chortles from the pine tree, I wonder what he is saying. He has such an amazing vocabulary. A mob of 5 crows came in and had their fill. It took the squabbling eagles a couple of days to find this little food bonanza, but once they did, it was soon gone. Because I sat, I heard the bugle of a late trumpeter swan; the piercing call of a pileated woodpecker. I am happy to report that the skunks have gone to bed, hopefully not in my hay pile in the barn. Unlike deer hunting, it turns out that if you go skunk hunting, you rejoice if you do not see any.

A phone call from my youngest daughter came early in the following week, asking if she and her boyfriend could come up to hunt off my stand. Sure, I said. He can hunt, and she and I could go do something else fun. I was thinking about breakfast in Effie. Maybe a little girl talk. It surprised me when the girl told me that she would be sitting with her guy on the stand. Okay, I told her. I will be camp cook and take care of those 2 big puppies they would be bringing. Supersized, these dogs make our goldens look small.

My two girls were little when my husband and his father built my stand for me. They made the stand good sized, and built high walls on it. Too young to leave in the house, I would get in some hunting in rather brief stints, bringing the children with. Sometimes they would sit beside me, keeping watch, but also they would slurp their hot chocolate, eat snacks, read books or color, and even roll around on the floor of the stand, perhaps taking a little nap. Our stand was not the quietest of places. Over the years as they got older, more and more they might choose to stay in the house. I felt they were too young to fire a rifle responsibly; they thought things were a bit slow. But if I needed help tracking, Libby was who I went to. She has a sharp eye. And both these girls know how to drag a deer, run a knife and wrap up meat.

And there were times. Don't tell anyone, but more than once I kept the youngest out of school for a day so that she could accompany me on a hunt. There was a project area for work I wanted to know better, in a different way than you will know from just working. So I took my rifle and Libby for a walk. She carried a .22 because there were grouse in those woods. That was the day she took a squirrel. I have the picture still. There was a picnic involving hot dogs over a fire in the pretty, rolling country of northeastern Chippewa National Forest that sticks in my mind. And I can still tell you about how Lib got a kick out of a beaver under the ice, the ice being so thin it made a wave as the animal swam. I cross that pond many years, there being a favorite piece of ground behind it I like to visit with my gun. I like to take these walks late in the season after the crowd has thinned, if the weather holds. I think of it as walkabout time.

Generous of nature, little Lib grew up into a delightful young woman with a big heart. Soft towards animals, I guess I had reached the conclusion that shooting one would not be her first choice, and that was okay with me. I don't need my children to hunt. I need them to be happy, each in their own way. But I do like the idea that they might share or at least understand my love for the out-of-doors. I've worked hard to live in these Minnesota woods; I hope they don't take

their childhood circumstances for granted. It pleased me to see my oldest daughter standing with her spouse on her grandmother's dock this summer, working her fishing rod. She knows what she's up to. I get a smile when I watch Libby stalking a bird's nest or a bee with her camera. These things interest her, and she takes some beautiful shots.

As luck would have it, Lib and Ethan drew a cold weekend for sitting, but they gave it a good try. Early Saturday morning they got a chance at a buck, and it was exciting even if they did not bag it. In the house, I found my hands full with the dogs. Still pups, these dogs are very well behaved when in the presence of their own people. With me, they needed to learn that in Grammy's house, Grammy makes the rules; not dogs. I figure it was good practice for things to come.

Sunday was so nasty, it surprised me that Lib still sat when Ethan made his way back indoors. I was glad when he and my husband teamed up to start in on the cold, hardened animal I already had hanging. With two lambs waiting to go into the freezer, I can take all the butchering help I can get, and was happy to send some meat home with the kids.

As the morning drew on, even the logger wondered how Lib could sit so long in that cold, howling wind. My stand is sheltered by some balsams, but not from that direction. I had given Lib all of my warmest orange, and I knew she had her heavy boots on, but still, a mother will worry. It was good to see her burst through the kitchen door with a huge smile on her face. The biscuits I had given her to stuff her big coat pockets had gone to feed the gray jays. She had caught the whiskey jack on video. What a neat time with her new friends on the stand!

I know from sitting out there, and hearing the absence of shots, we have a lot of folks who did not take a deer this year. But I hope that they found other ways in which to be satisfied and enjoyed their time in the woods. Ways to celebrate the natural world, and rejoice in the connection. Not everyone gets to be in places like these. For me, every part of the season is precious... the sitting, the looking, the watching, the wandering. And especially the part when, like venison, out of the blue the kids show up. Camp cook and Grammy to the supersized dogs turns out to be a great gig, too!



Photo by Libby Cable

by Kelly Barrett, Wildlife Biologist
Chippewa National Forest